

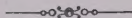
THE
KINGDOM OF GOD.

A DISCOURSE

DELIVERED BEFORE THE NEW HAMPSHIRE CONFERENCE,
AT WEIRS, JULY 17, 1878,

BY

REV. E. E. HALE.



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THE KINGDOM OF GOD.

Repent ye, for the kingdom of God is at hand. — **MATT. iv. 17.**

THAT is the reason why they are to repent:—Repent ye, for the kingdom of God is at hand. The reason is forgotten by many of our modern exhorters. But it was distinct when the Saviour spoke and when his apostles spoke. Yes! and when they prayed, as he taught them to pray, their first prayer was for this “kingdom of God,” “Thy kingdom come.”

What he taught them, and what they believed, was that a real kingdom of God was to come in this world that they lived in. And when the Christian church, in any of its simpler or more intelligent moments, falls back on the foundation truths, this is what it teaches now: that God can reign in this world, and that he is to reign here. It does not so much discuss the origin of evil, as proclaim the overthrow of evil. All things bad, mean, cruel, painful, distressing, unjust, unclean, untrue, shall cease to be. God shall reign. God’s kingdom shall come. Just as, in the heavens above, planets move as his law directs,—comets come and go, suns and worlds revolve, in precise obedience,—so the time shall come that in this world, which we choose to call the world of man, every thing shall obey his purpose. Why not? Man is his child, and like him. Man and man’s doings, the earth in all its methods, shall obey God. God’s kingdom shall come.

And this is the one appeal for repentance which the Christian revivalist makes: "Repent ye, because this kingdom of God is at hand."

It seems to me that this is a proper subject of address in the opening of a Conference of Liberal Christians, because the very words of the text explain just what the Liberal Church is for. It exists in the hope of bringing in this kingdom of God. We here, so far as we are banded together in one body, are united that the kingdom of God may more quickly come. As an organization, as a separate church, the Liberal Church has no reason to be, and no right to be, excepting this wish and the determination which springs from it. Other communions, other churches, have other objects beside this object: but this is our only object. In the methods of other communions, the coming of the kingdom of God is a business of more or less comparative importance. With us it is the only business. It is of paramount and all-covering importance. It colors all our preaching, all our tracts, all our papers, all our talk, all our every thing. Because paramount, it engages our attention as a specific and absolute reality in the business of such a Conference as assembles here.

Here were these apostles sent out, you would say, almost with no preparation, to proclaim glad tidings. What are their glad tidings? What is this gospel? The glad tidings are in this very announcement, that God is to reign now, in this world: that the kingdom of God is at hand. Paul goes up and down through all the coasts of Judea, through Asia Minor and Greece, proclaiming glad tidings; that he had something good to tell. What was this something good? It was, that the kingdom of God was at hand. He and they, in their eagerness, thought that this perfect reign of God would come sooner than the hard fact has proved. It has taken a little longer

than they thought, to overrule and to turn backward all the courses of evil. But I do not think it any such misfortune, that a preacher of good tidings should be sanguine in that direction. Better put God's kingdom a little too early, than put it off indefinitely far. A pity that later times of the church have freed themselves so placidly of that eager certainty. A pity that any age should settle down into the feeling that God's kingdom is coming, — yes, is always coming, and never close at hand; as if it were coming as to-morrow is always coming, which never comes: coming in a certain Pickwickian sense, but in no matter-of-fact sense, such as belongs to the affairs of men. Now, Paul and the rest preached that it was coming, as a man might tell you that next Christmas is coming, or that the foreign mail is coming. There would come running up into the square of some Greek town, an eager messenger to call the men lounging there. "Come here; here is a man proclaiming good news, glad tidings." "Good news! What is this good news? Come along, Marcus, come along, Stephanas, let's come and hear his good news." What did they hear when they came there? They heard that God himself was going to reign, and that right soon. Men who came from homes where their children were sick and in agony from pain, heard that God was to reign, that pain was to be done away, and health to be the law. Slaves who were certain of nothing but stripes, and men who lived by bitter alms, heard that God was to reign; every child of God was to have his own home and be protected in it. Men who yearned to know more than they knew, to understand something of the marvels around them, were told that God was to reign; and every child of God be helped by every other child, in the best training, in the best education, to learn all that man could learn, and know all that man could know. Yes, and this weeping mother, and her silent husband there, as they stop

to hear the preacher, while they are carrying to its resting-place the little urn which contains all that is left of the body of their child, they stop to ask about the glad tidings,—to be told that God reigns; that there is no death; that this is only an outside shell which has fallen off; that the dear girl is immortal. It was clear enough to those people, in those days of eager preaching, what the good tidings were.

But what would be the experience of Marcus or of Stephanas to-day, in one of our large towns, if a messenger came running to call them to some new-comer preaching “glad tidings,” which had not been heard before. Suppose they found the preacher and listened. If he were one of my Episcopalian friends, his first statement would be, in substance, —

“Dear friends, you will be rejoiced to know that I have brought some books with me, which that great and good man, King Henry VIII., prepared for you three hundred years ago, in which are written down your prayers for you; and you will all be delighted to know that regular worship will be conducted according to the forms in these books, at such and such a place, at such and such a time.”

Or, if the preacher were a Roman Catholic priest, his good tidings would be, that they should not longer be worried about their opinions or the selection of their duties, nor to decide between right and wrong. They would be glad to know that the Bishop of Rome had appointed another bishop, who had appointed a priest, who would be ready to tell them what to believe and what to disbelieve, what to do and what not to do, what to read and what not to read, how to vote, how to pray, and in general to direct life for them.

Or if the preacher were one of our Baptist or Methodist

friends, the probability is, that he would instruct Marcus or Stephanas how to save his own soul, how to secure his own heaven. And if Marcus stopped in the instruction to ask, "How about that riff-raff of rascals down at Hell Corner yonder, or Sodom?" there is danger that he would be told, "Now you disturb this meeting. My business is with you; I am to teach you how to face 'the wrath of the Lamb.'" I am told that there are no Calvinists now; and I hope that that is true. If there were a Calvinist preacher, and Marcus or Stephanas ran to hear him, his good tidings would be: "Dear friends, save yourselves if you can, by faith in Jesus; for the good tidings are, that most of you are predestined to be damned."

Mark me, I am not so unjust, nor such a fool, as to say, in either case, that this is the only gospel these men have to preach; but I say that, as things are, and as a preacher of either of these communions feels called upon to begin the announcement of his mission, here is his first gospel; such is his paramount doctrine; it takes precedence in his thought and in his preaching. He comes before a new community with such an announcement that a novice in that community would suppose that he had something else to proclaim than "the kingdom of God is at hand." Now, in the preaching of Jesus Christ, and in the charge he gave to his apostles, the paramount thing said at the beginning is "The kingdom of God is at hand." This is the glad tidings. To this, all things else in the appeal are secondary. Repentance even is conditioned on this truth. But, in the modern preaching of the sects, the kingdom of God is made secondary. In the spirited and sincere work of our friend Mr. Moody, the first appeal — and, so far as I see, the characteristic appeal — is to the individual man to save his own little separate soul; to turn him back to the poor selfishness of worrying about that. I think you have all observed, that, when in the true Christian

spirit, Mr. Moody gave himself up to the Christian work of averting intemperance, for instance, in any community, men stopped and looked at that, as if it were an exception in his regular business, — as if he had turned aside from his regular path. But the truth was, that here he was in the distinct line of Christian apostleship and Christian appeals, to which all else is exceptional or secondary. Preach to men to “repent;” yes, but for what reason? Why, because the kingdom of God is at hand!

Now let us come down a single step in history. Let us compare this early preaching with what has come out of it. Let us try the tree by its fruits. These men said the kingdom of God was coming. Was it coming? Were they right, or were they wrong? Does God reign to-day in any realm where the devil seemed to reign then?

When they said God was to reign, some mocked, and others went off to their old lives, saying, “We will hear thee again of this matter.” That is much the way in which most people take preaching now. People thought it was a fashion of exaggeration, as they talk now about the rhetoric of the pulpit. It was an Oriental phrase; or it was a fancy of a fanatic. The preachers did not, indeed, go into much detail. They were satisfied to say in general that God was to reign. And they were received in that indifferent way. Would things have been better had they spoken in detail? Would more credit have been given to them?

Suppose that some Agabus, with the spirit of prophecy, had said, “I will speak in detail. The Master did great things. But he said to those who came after him, ‘Greater things than these shall ye do.’ Do you not know what he means? I will tell you a little part of what he means. He means that the diseases shall be trampled

out, of which you and your children are dying. And I tell you that this leprosy you are talking of shall be unknown among Christian men, but as a curiosity in a museum. I tell you that the plague and the black-death shall cease, and be studied among the doubtful matters of history. I tell you that the average life of man shall be three times what it is to-day. I tell you that God shall forbid pain in surgery: that the curse of Eve shall be undone; and women shall bring their children into life without agony; that beneath the surgeon's knife the patient shall sleep serene. I tell you that, in the same way, God means that the word 'slavery' shall be a word without meaning in this world; that every child born into this world shall have every right and privilege which the strongest prince or richest lord can claim for his children. I tell you that God's reign will bring about the end of war and arms. Why, there shall be nations to whose extent your Roman empire is but as a province; whose people, generation after generation, shall never see a soldier in battle array. I tell you that God means to put an end to starvation and want: he means that there shall be nations of men who need not know what the word 'hunger' means. I tell you that God is to reign in such nations in happy homes, in which, from infancy to manhood, no child ever feels a blow; in which the peasant who drives the plough is as sure of all that makes life blessed and happy as the sovereign upon his throne. I tell you that in such lands men shall pay their tributes as their own proud gift to the government they love and are; shall insist on paying them, as kings insist on making gifts to each other, worthy of their thrones. I tell you that, under God's kingdom, there shall be nations which know no limit but the very ocean; which shall agree to live united and not in discord; as the Master says, 'They all shall be one.' They shall agree to lay their divided

opinions before one master tribunal. They shall maintain no separate armies; one only for the united empire, to give this tribunal power. There shall be no barbarian; no bondsman; no stranger. From ocean to ocean, every man, because he is man, shall have every privilege, whatever his language, his color, or his worship. Yes! and Jesus Christ shall so reign over the world,—in laws which grow from his laws, in governments founded on his word,—that, literally, from north to south, from east to west, farther than the Pillars of Hercules; farther than those people of the east, who are clad in silk, and send us spice and sugar: there shall be no island so separate, and no desert so parted, but that men shall know the paramount power of the nations which are called, however unworthily, by his name.”

If any prophet had said that, in Ptolemais, or Ephesus, or Corinth, or Athens, your practical Roman, your cultivated Greek, however eager for what is new, would have left his seat before the man was done his raving, he would have turned from such a babbler in scorn: he would not even have said he would hear him again. Yet a thousand times more than this—as you know—is already true. It is true, because Jesus Christ sent those men on that errand. It is true, because they stuck to their errand, and sought nothing else. They made it their paramount business to proclaim the glad tidings; and the glad tidings are, the reign of God in the world of God’s children!

The same work is the work of Christendom to-day, in this critical moment of the fortunes of the world. This is what the Liberal Church of to-day, what the Liberal communions stand for, glad tidings, and not sad tidings. Glad tidings; the absolute and real coming of the kingdom of God. This is their paramount office. It is in practice, in our communities, what “differences” them from other communions.

That is to say, the first work of a liberal church, in any region, is to bring that region up to the standard of the kingdom of God. And a liberal church has no right to be, there is no sort of use in establishing it, unless in the very "hard-pan" of its foundations, there is the determination of those who found it, that it shall "level up" the place in which it is, and bring it nearer to that standard of the kingdom of God.

Simply stated, if what you want is elegant ritual, you had better go to the Episcopalians, and be done with it.

If what you want is an old statement of duty, authorized by the traditions of many centuries, you had better go to the Greek church, from which, when it was old, the first of schismatics, the Roman church, broke away. Go there, and be done with it.

If your eagerness to save your separate little souls be any mere selfish—and, therefore, petty—eagerness for your individual comfort in the infinite future, go to Brother Moody; and be done with it.

If you want to live in a close ecclesiastical coterie,—to buy your groceries from one of "our people," to have your child taught her letters by one of "our people," to go and drink tea with a party all of "our people," go to our Baptist friends; and be done with it.

But, if you want to work, first and foremost for the reign of God in the hearts of men, and in the world's affairs, come into the Liberal Church, and you shall never be done with it!

To form a new church in any community is a great thing, but not a difficult thing; for, when two people come together in a Saviour's name,—though it is better when three come,—there is a church there, for all purposes, He is in the midst of them. Now it may be granted, that, in planting such a seed, the first necessity is, that it throw

out roots. You must not look for stem, leaves, or flowers first. Roots first, and these afterwards. Still, for heaven's sake, let nobody forget that leaves and flowers, and eventually fruit, are what the seed is planted for. If a church only roots itself, it might as well not be. The coming of the kingdom of God is the object, and the only object, for which this church is founded. Not simply the proclaiming or prophesying the coming, but absolutely the bringing it in. It is to hew down the mountains and to fill up the valleys; that is what the church is founded for. He that prepares the way of the Lord is greater than he who only prophesies it. And so, even when a new-born church is forming itself, while it is throwing down its roots and getting strength, every genuine man and woman in it, who is in earnest about it, ought to be asking, "What can we do to bring God's rule into this town?" "Whose fault was it, for instance, that those children died of *cholera infantum* last night in Swett Street?" "What could have been done to prevent that drunken fight at the corner grocery?" "Could we have done nothing to rescue that poor factory-girl who committed suicide yesterday?" What could we do, what could this church do, in such instances as this, where the devil seems to have succeeded, so that in his place the God of Love might reign?

To say the truth, the languor, not to say the failure, of our decorous, but somewhat slow system of church administration, comes in, in proportion as we forget or neglect this original object of all church organization. People say of the Unitarian church that it wants enthusiasm, — that it must hunt up some object for its attacks, to awaken the enthusiasm of its young men and maidens. Object enough, if it will only hold to the original object, and bring in the kingdom of God! The failure comes where this object is kept out of sight, by some miserable piece of fussy method which, for the moment, takes the

place of it. A young man, startled and glad to be startled, by finding out that he also is God's child, and has God's work to do in the world, comes to you in the joy of that discovery, and offers his maiden service in the great army. And you give him his post, — by telling him you would like to have him sell tickets among his friends for a strawberry party, which is to provide the means for carpeting the pulpit stairs. When you treat your first recruit so, you have no reason to wonder that the second recruit is long in coming. Let the recruits see that you have an object no less than God himself has! Let them see that the object of your church, first, second, and last, is no less than to bring nearer the reign of God in that town.

And this also is to be said in no rhetorical, nor yet in Scriptural language. It is to be said in detail. What you want is the enlargement and the victory of Moral Power. For instance: I know a village in the Green Mountains — I dare say you do — where the separate selfishness of men has been so tamed, where the powers that rule are so wise and so strong, that the whole village is one beautiful park, — really more lovely, more picturesque, more attractive, than, with all his wealth, the richest nobleman in England can create around his home. To make beauty like that in the surroundings of home, is the worthy object of the Christianity of a town. And it is quite within the power of the Christian men and women of any village in New England to achieve a victory like that, when they so determine.

I know, and you know, communities where the management of public amusements is not left to the accidental drift of wandering showmen, — but where the best and most highly cultivated people in the town take the personal oversight and preparation of them. I could name a town where every adult, man and woman, except the very

aged, was a member of the well-organized club or society which provided for all that town the fine music, the bright plays, the lectures, and other entertainments for its winter. Now it is in the power of the Christian men and women of any village in New England to achieve a victory like that, when they so determine.

I know a town, and many of you know it, where manners are so pure, and life so simple, that when, once a month, its elegant town-hall was filled for a really social party, the committee carried their invitations to every cabin, as to every palace, in the place, — and it has its palaces as it has its cabins. Now it is in the power of the Christian men and women of any village in New England, so to maintain cordial friendship among neighbors, and so to train in decency the growing children, as to achieve a Christian victory like that, when they so determine.

I know a town, and you know it, where a laboring man, whose daily duty takes him to the hardest toil, at the end of eight hours of such work, or ten, goes to the room which the public provides for him, to find waiting at his table, in his work-room, the costly mathematical treatises which the public has bought for him, to carry forward there the studies which you and I cannot begin to appreciate, because we cannot begin to comprehend them, and to conduct his correspondence on such themes with the most distinguished mathematicians in the land. Now it is in the power of the Christian men and women in any town to give such direction to its public arrangements that such a victory as that shall be possible, whenever they so determine.

I know a town where the watchfulness over every child born into it is so absolute, that literally not one child escapes the luxury of an education. The officials watch for each child of God as for hidden treasure indeed.

And literally every child who breathes God's air is sure at least of intellectual culture, such as in other lands prophets and saints have longed for, and have waited for, and have died without the sight. Now it is quite within the power of the Christian men and women of any town so to arrange its methods of public education as to achieve that victory, when they so determine.

I know a town where the simple health regulations are so well enforced that the average age of man, if the experience of many recent years is to be taken, is sixty-seven years, — well nigh the mark of three score and ten indicated by Moses nearly forty centuries ago. So many tears which have never flowed! so many little graves which were never opened and never closed! Now it is quite in the power of the Christian men and women of any town in New England to enforce God's reign and law in the mere matter of health so as to achieve such a triumph as that, when they so determine.

I know a town — more than one town, thank God, and so do you — where the Christianity of the place has so triumphed over man's greed and man's lust, that for years on years no open bar for the sale of liquor has existed there. For a generation the boys and young men there have grown up, not tempted by that wretched delusion which most quickly steals away life and manhood. Now it is quite within the power of the Christian men and women of any New England town to achieve that victory in its borders, when they so determine.

I know a county in New England, as so do you, where no person is imprisoned in the House of Correction. Its neat, whitewashed cells are empty, thank God. The plates and cups and saucers in its pantry are never taken from the shelves. The useless bolts rust in their rusting staples. The master and mistress of the jail fill up life by taking summer boarders in the house assigned to them.

Now it is in the power of the Christian men and women to achieve a triumph akin to that in every county, when the religious and moral forces combine to their work of certain victory, — that is to say, when they so determine.

More than this, and better than this, I know, thank God, many households of Christian training, where little children grow up glad and happy, because they know they are God's children, — where they never feared a blow, — where they never shrunk under anger, — where life has been as beautiful and as glad to them as Heaven. I have seen such children come with their parents every morning to sing their hymn of thanks, as simply as the birds sing theirs. I have found them looking forward on life, as bravely and as certainly as the morning sun looks forward to his daily course of blessing. Now it is in the power of the Christian men and women of any place so to bring up their own households, so to show their neighbors what Religion is, — that "Love is the Whole," — as to achieve everywhere a victory as great as that, when they so determine.

And, not to go farther, I know, and you know, communities where the love of God and the love of Man have so far exerted themselves already, that, from "native impulse, elemental force," the best men drift into the places of command. It is of course that their governors are modest, honest, brave, and true. It is in the power of the Christian men and women of any community in New England to bring about a victory as great as that, when they so determine.

Talk of lack of enthusiasm! Say that the Church wants a visible object! Try this visible object, — the visible kingdom of a present God! When your young man wakes up to find that he also is a son of God, and

comes to your church, to ask where he is to stand, and what he is to do, make this answer first of all, —

“To begin with, we have to see that this village is as healthy as those happy hamlets on the Cordilleras ;

“We mean to have it as lovely as the villages on Lake Como ;

“We mean to have its morals and manners as pure as if it were the home of Oberlin ;

“For children born apt for art, there shall be advantages as genuine, though they be not as large, as at Milan or Florence ;

“For whatever other range of learning, our schools and libraries shall be such as Horace Mann and Robert Owen never dreamed of ;

“For the search after truth, we mean that these people shall be as eager as the noble Jews of Berea ;

“Life shall be simple here as if we lived in the islands of the blessed ;

“And we believe there will come to us a happiness, because we do not seek it, — such as men sought for and did not find among the Lotus-eaters and in Sybaris.”

Once offer a programme like that, for the duty of a staff-officer in bringing in the Reign of God, and your young women of life, and your young men of courage, will hear you gladly, — will enlist, and put their shoulders to the wheel.

And these are only so many little illustrations of a beginning. I have not pretended to describe the Kingdom of God. I have only tried to name some of the first steps to be taken in the preparation. To make that preparation is the duty of the Church. As the kingdom comes, it will describe itself. For us to make the highway ready, that He may reign whose right it is to reign !



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